

Make ICT facilities viable in rural areas

People should be aware of the high-tech benefits: Dr Chan

By Alexius Barieng

KUCHING: Information and communications technology (ICT) facilities should not be plonked into the rural areas just for the people to goggle at while unaware of the benefits.

Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri Dr George Chan believed that ICT facilities should not be provided in rural areas just for the sake of putting them there.

He said it was more important to create awareness of the benefits of ICT among rural folk first, and getting them excited about it, before fully implementing ICT programmes in the areas.

"Unless people ask for it and unless there is a demand for it, you don't just 'plonk' (put) it there; which means that whatever we put in place we must fully utilize them.

"That is why we want to encourage people to get very curious about ICT, to get them wanting to have access to information," he said at a press conference after opening the International Symposium on ICT for Rural Development 2006 at a hotel here, yesterday.

In creating curiosity about ICT, school children are the main target group as they were the ones most inclined towards this technology and generally "dying to get information" from the Internet.

"The first thing to do then is introduce an element of curiosity in our students so that once we put out the ICT facilities they will all go for it.

"Even the older people, once you get them excited about it they will also use these facilities."

Dr Chan, who is also Minister of Modernisation of Agriculture and Minister of Industrial Development, made this point when asked to comment on the State's Electronic Resource Centres



CHECKING OUT PRODUCTS FROM E-BARIO: Dr Chan (second left) shares a light moment with Rashid (left) at the ebario sdn bhd booth at the exhibition held in conjunction with the symposium.

(ERC) programme.

To date, 12 ERCs have been implemented, with the target of 46 more sites to be set up during the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

This programme aims to provide free ICT and Internet facilities in rural districts and sub-districts in the State.

As for those involved in implementing ICT in rural areas, Dr Chan stressed that they must place as much emphasis on maintaining the facilities as in getting these facilities there in the first place.

This was necessary to avoid disappointment and frustration among the rural people who were most likely to benefit from having ICT in their areas, he said.

"You get people all excited about the (ICT) facilities you set up, but the next thing you know it breaks down and then nobody goes and repairs it for weeks and months, and eventually people (in the

rural areas) get very disappointed and very frustrated.

"That's why I told them (ICT implementors) that when you go and introduce (ICT), you have got to see it through; don't just say how you are going to put it there, it's just as important how you are going to maintain it and how you keep it working there."

The "maintenance culture" was even more relevant for facilities in the rural areas because of the difficulty in reaching these places, compared to urban areas.

"If problems (related to ICT) happen in the urban areas, two or three experts would be able to handle the problem immediately, but in places like Bario, it is not that easy to send the same experts in the same way," he said, adding this was one of the reasons why even Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had stressed on the "maintenance culture" at great lengths.

Meanwhile, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) and Asian Info-Communication Council (AIC) are the organisers of this inaugural International Symposium on ICT for Rural Development, in collaboration with the ICT Unit of the Chief Minister's Department, Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) and Japan's National Institute of Information and Communication Technology (NICT).

During the two-day symposium, 10 working papers on significant works in research, development and application of ICT for rural development, would be presented.

Among those present at the opening were Unimas management board chairman Tan Sri Bujang Nor, vice-chancellor Professor Abdul Rashid Abdullah and the symposium chairperson Professor Khairuddin Abdul Hamid.